Laura Dern's eternal return

Abstract

Inland Empire (2006), David Lynch's first film shot and edited exclusively with digital video technology, is arguably his most inscrutable work to date. This essay positions its analysis within the established discourse about the feminine and death in the director's work in order to trace how his experimentation with the digital perpetuates the female star's status as an already exhausted object of violence. By reading certain key vignettes in the film, it shows how the brutalized figure of 'woman' works in dialectical synthesis with Lynch's ongoing investigation into the ever-changing materiality of the cinematic medium. Exploiting the longstanding power of the female figure at the iconic heart of classical Hollywood cinema, her many reincarnations in *Inland Empire* illustrate the layered substrate of Lynch's cinematic 'sadism'. Death in *Inland Empire* is a stylistic ploy imposed upon a female body that will not die (or Lynch will not let die), kept uncannily alive in a sadistic refusal of finitude. In this 'pornography of the uncanny', Lynch orchestrates a digital metalanguage that abstracts the cinema into a toy for his fort/da game between death and un-death in a chain of mise-en-scenes erected to showcase the mise-en-abyme of Laura Dern.

Issue Section:

Articles

David Lynch's *Inland Empire* (2006) spectacularly features a death that is not one: Laura Dern, stabbed in the guts with a screwdriver, drags herself along the fabled Hollywood Walk of Fame. Restaging the cliche that 'film stars never die', Lynch implants this fake death at the climax of what is, for him, a three-hour exercise in the new stock in trade of digital filmmaking. Predictable signifiers of horror movie violence – Dern's neon-lit screams, her frantic freefall, a last vomit of bodily fluids – serve as the backdrop for Lynch's ultimate gag. Tracking out from a closeup on Dern's stiffening face, our perspective slowly widens to include a bulky camera crane intruding upon the frame. The director yells 'Cut!', and Dern, barely dead, rises from her fate. Neither the film-within-a-film nor the film we are watching has ended. The film star is not dead, and will not die.

Inland Empire, Lynch's first feature-length film shot and edited exclusively with digital video technology, is strewn with the corpses of such un-deaths. Interspersed throughout are flashbacks to other women who have, like Dern, been rammed through with a

screwdriver, their innards casually exposed. These women never stay dead, returning like slapstick zombies to prolong the length of the film. Thus I begin my reading of *Inland Empire* by giving away the ending (or lack of one) because it is through the interminable experience of it that I hope to articulate its similarly inconclusive stakes. What does it mean that *Inland Empire* – arguably Lynch's most inscrutable work to date – revolves around cinema's oldest formula: ‘A Woman in Trouble’, as its tagline states? How might Lynch's experimentation with the digital perpetuate woman's status as an already exhausted object of violence? What sort of horror is this, finally, where death is not allowed?

Existing scholarship on Lynch has noted the incessant thematization of women and death in his work. Martha Nochimson suggests that the central conflict in Lynch's films is between the ‘imbalances of phallocentric aggression’ and his faith in the sacrificial ‘openness’ of a ‘feminine, labial receptivity’.[1] Michel Chion, in contrast, sidesteps this hagiographic recuperation to point out that Lynch unmistakably ‘enjoys manipulating the subject of women to elicit a reaction’,[2] rousing them to ‘live, move, and talk’ even after he has killed them off. ‘In Lynch's films,’ Chion writes, ‘it is hard to die for real’.[3] Indeed, his female victims inevitably find themselves in a dream-like or nightmarish ‘beyond’. While Nochimson valorizes this cryptic state of transcendence as redemptive, Chion regards it, in a more sinister cast, to be ‘clearly designated … as a place where one never dies’.[4]

Following Nochimson and Chion, criticism of *Inland Empire* has vacillated on this murky divide between Lynch's apparent misogyny and his boldly experimental aesthetics. On the one hand, as Amy Taubin reasons, ‘the sadism visited upon women’[5] throughout *Inland Empire* could be seen as an indictment of the creative, economic and gendered constraints of the Hollywood entertainment industry in favour of an ultimately liberating portrayal of a ‘higher’ (coded ‘feminine’) consciousness, both Dern's and Lynch's own, at work. This plausible though somewhat tidy reading seems to be at cross-purposes with Kristin Jones's more vexed comment that *Inland Empire* is so ‘wildly challenging’ that it makes Lynch's preceding film *Mulholland Dr*. (2001) ‘feel downright classical’.[6] Michael Atkinson likewise underscores the brutalization of the spectator's critical faculties. With its polyglot profusion of genres and media, *Inland Empire* amounts to a kind of digital–cinematic exquisite corpse. In Atkinson's estimation, the film is so ‘uncompromising’ and ‘hermetically sealed’ that it can be taken only as ‘purely a movie and nothing else’, deliberately constructed to ‘evade the butterfly nets of critical response’.[7]

Against these rhetorical extremes, I shall instead approach *Inland Empire* as a testing ground for the familiar gestures and movements of Lynch's stylistic repertoire as he works within a new format. This essay embraces the gambit of the director's notorious rejection

of any one intention or meaning behind his work. It eschews the temptation to overdetermine *Inland Empire*'s textual complexity, either by narrativizing it into the mere fantasy emanating from the psyche of a single character or neutralizing its sexual violence by focusing on the film's purely formal aspects. In trying to bridge these hermeneutic poles, I propose one route among many across *Inland Empire*'s protean, almost hypertextualized, surface. By reading key vignettes in a film that is more a collection of recurring symptoms – of a director exploring the new contours of a beloved object suddenly made strange again – than a stable system, I hope to bring into relief what I see as an ethics of *return* in Lynch's cinema. The terrorized figure of woman in the film works in dialectical synthesis with Lynch's ongoing investigation into the ever-changing materiality of the cinematic medium. Exploiting the longstanding power of the female figure at the iconic heart of classical Hollywood cinema, her many reincarnations in *Inland Empire* illustrate the layered substrate of Lynch's cinematic sadism.

For his part, after his initiation into the production capabilities of the digital, Lynch has emphatically declared that ‘Film is dead’.[8] Coming from a director who regularly employs death as just another trick ending, this statement may be considered suspect. Positioning my analysis within the established discourse on the feminine and death in Lynch's work, I contend that *Inland Empire* is his response to another death that is not one – namely, the equally interminable ‘death of cinema’. While it is not in the purview of this essay to engage extensively with the already very advanced debates on that subject, I nonetheless bring this other ‘death’ into play because the idea of the cinema itself as a dying ‘body’ helps to illuminate Lynch's mechanisms of disavowal. Death in *Inland Empire* is a stylistic ploy imposed upon a body – that of woman and of film – that will not die (or that Lynch will not let die), kept uncannily alive in a sadistic refusal of finitude. Through the insistent *camp* resurrection of Laura Dern, I show how the battered female star becomes the allegorical support for the director's possessive return to the pleasures of a cinema that relies on doubling and proliferating the undead. By taking *Inland Empire* as a limit case for Lynch's style, this essay attempts to master the auteur's increasing impenetrability as he digitally remasters, so to speak, his signature mind-fucks of affective excess and horror.

Before turning to *Inland Empire*, however, it is necessary to address the corollary figure of the dying or dead female star within a wider cinematic history. Revived in Lynch's film, she haunts the cinema with an uncanny tenacity. Long a fixture of the Hollywood – and specifically the camp Hollywood – mythos, she is a natural addition to Lynch's exceedingly unnatural collection of dancing midgets, lip-synching mobsters and bobby-socked femmes fatales. As Susan Sontag writes in ‘Notes on camp’, the point of camp is that ‘style is everything’:[9]

> *Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman'. To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.*[10]

The lens of camp – and the lens of Lynch, I would add – blocks out content for the sake of 'the double sense in which things can be taken'. This double sense is not the difference between a literal and a symbolic meaning. Rather, in the duplicity of gesture hinted at above, it is between 'the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice'.[11]

The triumph of style over substance, in other words, is the rule of camp, which 'adores cliché, surface, image'.[12] This is the rule that Lynch follows across an *oeuvre* that plumbs the spoils of an outdated cinematic iconography. The dead female star is but one stylistic and narrative staple for Lynch who, in almost all his work, habitually collapses the present into the alluring trappings and textures of a bygone (primarily 1950s) era. Shedding light on camp qua nostalgia in this manner, Andrew Ross in his 'Uses of camp' categorizes it as a 'parasitical practice'.[13] Camp reappropriates – or puts into Sontag's knowing quotation marks – whatever has become defunct and devalued within the hegemony of the contemporary mainstream. Not only does camp poke fun at the serious or straightforward version of cultural production, it is a mortifying process (with all the accompanying associations of necrosis and embarrassment) that thrives on 'deceased cultural forms', recirculating them 'this time around, with the glamour of resurrection'.[14]

Reminiscent of the retro inclinations in both style and content of Lynch's cinema, this camp parasitism especially attaches itself to the female figure. Camp's fascination with the female star epitomizes its peculiar ethos of excess. The divergence between real and fake, past and present is embodied in the female star, whose own 'excesses', as Caryl Flynn astutely observes, are 'gauged in terms of temporal dislocation'.[15] This widening gap between 'seeming' and 'being', 'then' and 'now', is camp's playground. Camp classics such as *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, 1962) dramatize the 'necrophilic economy that underpins the camp sensibility'.[16] The fallen divas in these fables of the dying or forgotten star are the casualties of age no less than 'changes in cultural technologies'.[17] The shift from silent to sound film, or from the big-budget studio system to the less exalted television industry, for example, renders them prematurely 'dead', embalmed in the obsolescent media vaults of cultural memory. Confined to dilapidated Beverly Hills mansions and dolled up in the finery of yesteryear, they linger on as the grotesque afterimages of their younger selves.

The implicit cause and effect of media transition in hastening the demise of these once exalted stars will contribute strongly, as I shall show, to the structural logic behind the digitally bred horror of *Inland Empire*, which dwells parasitically upon the outdated tropes of a mediated past. More generally, though, the morbid pathos of camp explains much of Lynch's own taste for offbeat anachronism. ‘Camp demands disphasure’, Flynn continues, ‘not just of signifier and signified, but a more general being out of step, a lagging behind, a barrier between subject and object’.[18] While Lynch is not campy in the tongue-in-cheek spirit of John Waters, Robert Aldrich or Billy Wilder, his retro carnivalesque fetishization of the female star does reduce her to a code or abstract system to be viciously parodied and, indeed, camped.[19] Literalizing the glorified camp link between glamour and death, Lynch splits his female star not just into woman and ‘woman’, icon and reality, but into an entire panoply of distorted afterimages. In his merciless abstraction and reengineering of her image, Lynch, in his own singularly sadistic way, fulfils Hitchcock's succinct dictum (borrowed from French dramatist Victorien Sardou's advice to aspiring playwrights) to ‘Torture the woman!’. Where Hitchcock's ‘abuse’ of his female characters reliably led, however, to increasing feats of narrative sophistication, Lynch pursues the possibilities of feminized horror to lethal extremes. From the paranormal butchery of Laura Palmer in *Twin Peaks* (1990-91) to the hysterical suicide of Betty Elms in *Mulholland Dr.* to Dern's unending joke murder, his cinematic corpus plays out like one long rehearsal of death – a death which is, in its exceptionally decorative brutality, more style than substance.

Remarking on horror's occasional ‘lapse into camp’, Carol Clover comments: ‘The art of the horror film, like the art of pornography, is to a very large extent the art of rendition or performance’.[20] This affinity between camp, horror and, instructively, pornography is apparent throughout *Inland Empire*. While not pornographic by conventional standards, the film's ‘miasma’ of ‘non-narrative rhythms’, both ‘turgid’ and ‘unrelenting’ as J. Hoberman has vividly put it, shares some of that genre's mechanistic excesses.[21] In what follows, I trace how Lynch, an expert ‘in the technical production of uncanny effects’,[22] approaches something like a ‘pornography of the uncanny’ in *Inland Empire*. Incorporating the digital as a new tool for his torture of Dern, he enacts her ‘glamorous resurrection’ in a near farcical cycle of mock-psychoanalytic terror.

In an overlap between reality and fiction, an ageing Gloria Swanson as the senile Norma Desmond watches a film that Swanson never completed, Erich von Stroheim's *Queen Kelly* (1929), during a scene in *Sunset Boulevard*.[23] An intertitle card reads: ‘Cast out this wicked dream which has seized my heart!’ This phrase reappears again midway through *Inland Empire*. Dern, a fading Hollywood actress in her comeback role in a remake of an old film, has an eerie moment of dissociation. She comes across the apparition (improbably emanating from a large ketchup stain) of the murdered Polish actress who

starred in the film's unfinished original, entitled *4/7* – based on *Axxon N*, the 'longest-running radio play in history' – repeating these very lines. This citation arrives after tangled convolutions of plot, character and setting in *Inland Empire*'s film-within-a-film-within-several-unfinished-films. A desperate plea from a buried cinematic past, it resonates with both our and Dern's uneasiness that what we are seeing, and what we have seen or will see, is part of a haunted web across space, time and media.

The theme of the uncanny – one of the most prevalent concepts applied to Lynch's cinema – will be deployed here in particular juxtaposition to the idea of camp. Freud's essay on the 'uncanny' resembles Sontag's 'Notes on camp' insofar as it, too, is an open-ended theory of a feeling. The uncanny, as Freud defines it, is 'that class of the terrifying which leads us back to something long known to us, once very familiar'. It belongs, according to Freud, to all that 'arouses dread or creeping horror'.[24] If camp celebrates death in a 'glamorous resurrection', the uncanny is a corresponding aesthetic of the *undead*. The decrepit female star of camp is the unspoken inspiration for the uncanny horror of *Inland Empire*. Resuscitating her for the digital age, Lynch systematically figures her through the double or *Doppelgänger*. The uncanny double 'possesses knowledge, feeling, and experience in common with the other, identifies [herself] with another person, so that [her] self becomes confounded, or the foreign self is substituted for [her] own'. In this ominous circuit of 'telepathy', the recurrence of 'similar situations, a same face, character-trait, twist of fortune, or a same crime' unveils 'that which ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light'.[25]

The 'hidden and secret' history that Lynch invokes throughout *Inland Empire* belongs to that same 'cult of Hollywoodiana' which is the object of camp obsession. His reference to an obscure detail in *Sunset Boulevard*, which is in turn an obscure reference to a film that came before it, which in turn mirrors *Inland Empire*'s nested formal structure, captures the dizzying logic of dread that suffuses the film. Strung together as a series of loosely-connected episodes and vignettes, *Inland Empire* does not form a narrative whole so much as a Byzantine assemblage of conventions, tropes and stock character types recycled from a collective pop-cultural consciousness. The film-within-a-film, the film about filmmaking, the adulterous love triangle, the domestic melodrama, the noir murder mystery, the gothic romance, and even the talk show, sitcom and behind-the-scenes verite of reality TV are all evoked. These heterogeneous scenarios constitute the indispensable background of Dern's multiple realities. Subtly infused with the spirit of 'being-as-playing-a-role', however, they too appear as if in quotation marks – a camp-tinged pastiche of those realities. Materializing the 'double sense' of camp style into the uncanny content of the film itself, Lynch unfolds Freud's 'theory of a feeling' on a cinematic scale.

Dern, as *Inland Empire*'s titular 'woman in trouble', is Lynch's version of the noir heroine

who may be hysteric, missing or dead but must invariably return to pay the 'debt' for her crimes. As the movie star Nikki Grace, Dern plays the cheating housewife Susan Blue in the saccharine melodrama *On High in Blue Tomorrows*. An early scene between Dern and her costar Justin Theroux signals the first of *Inland Empire*'s many uncanny doublings. The scene follows the revelation that the stars of the uncompleted Polish adaptation of the film were murdered, victims of a 'secret' within the story. In portentous mimicry of that past, Dern as Nikki confides to her costar that her husband knows about their secret affair, just as their characters are engaged in one within the film's love story. Framed in an awkward fishbowl closeup, she implores him in the affected tone of a bad soap opera star: 'I think my husband knows about you – about us. He'll kill you. He'll kill us both!' Struck by her own hackneyed histrionics, she straightens up in the middle of her sentence to exclaim, 'Damn! This sounds like dialogue from our script!' As the angry director (Jeremy Irons) interjects from offscreen, Lynch abruptly cuts to a camera dolly that has been presiding over the supposedly private exchange. A baffled Dern belatedly realizes she has mistaken the movie set of *On High in Blue Tomorrows* for her reality. Foreshadowing the trick death on Hollywood Boulevard, Lynch sets up dual visual tracks, one 'real' and one 'fake'. The prop camera furtively planted as the 'real' recording device serves as a misleading decoy for the digital camera that hovers elusively outside the frame. Injecting the foreign into the familiar, Lynch inscribes the uncanny here as a threatening perspectival reversal within the narrative 'double features' he establishes. In this disquieting preview of things to come, we are called upon, like Dern, to interrogate the reality – or the movie – we take for granted, as if there were always a parallel universe slightly beyond our immediate perception.

The prefix 'para' can mean either 'against' or 'beside'. Lynch activates both connotations in the rampant textual paranoia of *Inland Empire*, where everything can mean what it seems to mean and something else entirely. Elaborating on Freud, Jean-Claude Milner theorizes the uncanny, or *unheimlich*, as a kind of parasite:

> *The unheimlich is not the inverse of the familiar, but the familiar parasitized by an anxiety that disperses it. In the same way, one would readily say that in the modern universe, there is no distinction between the domain of the infinite and the domain of the finite, but that the infinite perpetually parasitizes the finite insofar as everything infinite is fundamentally posed as able to be infinitely other than it is. … In a similar manner in psychoanalysis, the unconscious perpetually parasitizes consciousness, thereby manifesting how consciousness can be other than it is, yet not without a cost: it establishes precisely how it cannot be other. The negative prefix is nothing more than the seal of this parasitism.*[26]

Milner's provocative statement that the ‘infinite perpetually parasitizes the finite’ will develop as a forceful subtext as *Inland Empire* progresses. For now, I would stress that the notion of the uncanny as a ‘parasite’ aligns with camp as a ‘parasitical practice’ that reinhabits denatured cultural significations. The ‘un’ of the uncanny, as Milner takes pains to distinguish, is not the inverse of, but a surplus that attaches itself to, the familiar. The familiar does not become unfamiliar, but strange in its overfamiliarity. Similarly, if the uncanny parasitizes the familiar, camp likewise parasitizes the ‘cliché, surface, image’ identified by Flynn. The rote scenarios of distress Lynch assigns to Dern's woman in trouble in *Inland Empire* is the domain of the familiar uncannily distorted through his camp lens ‘of the exaggerated, the off, of *things-being-what-they-are-not*’.[27] Recognizing herself as a cliche, Dern is nonetheless trapped in her roles-within-roles in films-within-films – roles and films that alarmingly spill over into reality, and vice versa – compelled to perform her own fracturing of identity as stipulated by Lynch's self-replicating script.

A subsequent scene integrates Nikki's/Susan's fear of a murderous husband into the routine plot device of the noir heroine who seeks out a private detective for help. Shot from an off-kilter angle that insinuates her growing uncertainty, a battered Dern, her step unbalanced, climbs a shadowy flight of stairs to a dim office where a silent man in a shabby suit awaits her. The camera quietly fixes on her bruised face and haphazard lipstick, this time conjuring a beleaguered survivor of domestic violence rather than a ditzy soap opera star. Without prologue, Dern unsteadily launches into a bitter diatribe about the countless contemptible men in her life: a man who lunged at her with a crowbar; a man whose eyes she gouged out in self-defence; a man with a dick the size of a rhinoceros that ‘fucked the shit’ out of her; a man she kicked so hard that ‘his nuts went crawling up into his brain for refuge’. These graphic iterations of sexual violence are gratuitous insofar as we are not sure why and to whom Dern is recounting them, and what has transpired since we last saw her as either Nikki or Susan. She echoes our growing confusion over her blurred identities – over who came before or after – when she desperately admits, looking straight into the camera as if supplicating our help: ‘The thing is, I don't know what was before or after. I don't know what happened first, and it's kind of laid a mind-fuck on me.’

This ‘mind-fuck’ could be, from one perspective, the aftermath of the abuse inflicted upon her. Dern's character appears powerless to construct a coherent chronology from the sheer quantitative overload of physical assaults she has endured. From another perspective, it is the inescapable manifestation of the uncanny temporal structure of the film itself. Lynch inserts this episode – the first one shot with Dern for the film – as a looping interlude throughout the latter half of *Inland Empire*.[28] Excerpted in discontinuous fragments, it is impossible to determine when it begins or ends, or whether it is Nikki or Susan that is speaking. Through the constant chiasmus of Dern's doubles, Lynch

chronically advances our doubt – as he does hers – about which one is in fact parasitizing the other. In yet another uncanny merging of the 'on' and 'off'-screen – one that leaches into our reality – Dern pinpoints what we ourselves might be thinking when she compares her hallucinatory shock to being a spectator of her own life: 'I was watching everything going around me', she says, 'while standing in the middle, watching it, like in a dark theatre before they bring up the lights up. I'm sitting there, wondering how can this be.' Dern's reflection on the circularity of her world is itself an uncanny reflection on the temporal and spatial disphasure of Lynch's interweaving of media upon media, identity upon identity. It belies what I have suggested as Lynch's ethics of return – an ethics that does not so much differentiate between right and wrong, good and evil, but rather pushes our spectatorial tolerance via an abrasive formal violence that pierces through layers of appearance to excavate that which has been repressed. This repressed always reappears, like Dern's oscillating personas, in the shape of something else, someone other.

Formalizing this 'return of the repressed' into a guiding aesthetic principle, Lynch multiplies the suffering of his bewildered female star into its own ethical imperative. The experience Dern cites of dissociating from her body – a body filmed not just by one 'film' camera, but also by the digital one that parasitizes it – coincides with the 'doubling, dividing, and interchanging of the self' that is a sign of the uncanny. The *Doppelgänger*, Freud explains, is both an 'assurance of immortality' as well as a 'ghastly harbinger of death'.[29] In this dual role, the uncanny double therefore anticipates an impending limbo of *undeadness*. As with the 'un' of the uncanny, the 'un' of the undead does not designate the opposite of the living but something *beyond* the living or the dead. A typical symbol of the uncanny, for instance, is the automaton. Not quite alive yet mechanically propelled into the semblance of life, it exemplifies the alienating excess of the uncanny. This excess matches up with Freud's assertion that the uncanny is fundamentally a deferred repression that eats away at the surface of the familiar. In the aforementioned passage from Milner, the unconscious is where the parasitical possibilities to consciousness reside. Arising out of the repressed rift between the conscious and unconscious, the disjunctive effect of the uncanny derives from the recognition of the potential for things being always somehow *other* than they seem. Aggressively figuring the uncanny through Dern's liminal performance of undeadness – of being neither alive nor dead, neither real nor fake – Lynch mines the embodied excess at the intersection of camp and horror.

Tellingly, there is a cinematic tenor to Dern's professed splitting of the self. Dern stumbles upon the awareness that she may not be who she thinks she is but may in fact be 'seized' by a 'wicked dream' of someone else's making. Like a babbling automaton, she reels off her woes in a barrage of anecdotal run-ons. In the context of her character, Dern's psychological disarray might be the result of her repressed traumas breaking through in

the course of her digressive litany of violence. More persuasively, though, I would argue that it is the product of Lynch's formal torture. Her afflictions – at the hands of the anonymous parade of men or, more pointedly, of Lynch's cinematic machinations – do not, miraculously, lead to her death. Mired ‘in that sense of helplessness experienced in dreams’,[30] her suffering is redistributed into alter egos that each nauseatingly carries one within the other in a deranged fugue. Suspended in a time-warp of herself, Dern is confronted with increasingly uncanny doubles in Lynch's startling spatial and temporal conundrums of the familiar turned inside out, forward and backward.

The sexually explicit material of Dern's monologue, moreover, provides a segue into the more overtly pornographic dimension of *Inland Empire*. Etymologically, pornography denotes ‘the writing of prostitutes’. The bulk of Lynch's film is a lurid collage of variations on a theme of the uncanny, hewing ever more closely to Freud's autobiographical account of the uncanny as his unwitting return to a red light district populated by ‘painted women’. Lynch introduces the theme of prostitution obliquely at first, via the allusions to ‘whores’ and ‘fucking’, ‘tits and ass’ that pepper the film. Then, in a striking non sequitur, Dern finds herself surrounded by a garish troupe of prostitutes in her red lamp-lit bedroom. Lounging around smoking cigarettes and licking their lips, the women casually discuss the men they have fucked. These are the same women we see in the flashbacks to a sepia-toned 1930s Poland, in which they taunt the murdered Polish actress (Karolina Gruzska), the historical double to Dern's ‘woman in trouble’. In a prophetic reenactment of the past, they also taunt Dern before she is murdered on Hollywood Boulevard. Like a promiscuous Greek chorus spouting lines from Freud's smutty nightmare, they tease both women: ‘Look at us, and tell us if you've known us before’.

The recurrent appearance of these prostitutes, along with Dern's uncensored sexual trials, shifts the tone of Lynch's ‘pornography of the uncanny’ to a decidedly sadistic register. Rather than just the uncanny double, these scenes summon up another double that is the function, precisely, of too much sexual violence. I refer here to the ‘beautiful victim’ of the Sadean executioner. In the Marquis de Sade's chronicles, the women are the chief narrators of their survival under untenable male violations. Dern's catalogue of sexual debasement inaugurates what I interpret to be a transition – a marked difference in degree – in Lynch's figuration of the undead. In a passage that elegantly encapsulates the ramifications of this difference in degree, Jacques Lacan writes:

> *In the Sadean scenario, suffering doesn't lead the victim to the point where she is dismembered or destroyed. It seems rather that the object of all the torture is to retain the capacity of being an indestructible support. Analysis shows clearly that the subject separates out a double of [herself] who is*

> *made inaccessible to destruction, so as to make it support what, borrowing a term from the realm of aesthetics, one cannot help calling the play of pain.*[31]

The persecuted noir heroine that Dern represents could be classified as the 'beautiful victim' of the Hollywood system's ideological 'play of pain' insofar as she must stay intact as a cipher for male guilt and anxiety. Such psychoanalytic platitudes compose more of a motif than a motive, however, in Lynch's extraction of the well-worn codes of that system.[32] Balanced somewhere between the uncanny and the sadistic, Lynch's 'punishment' of Dern fits more squarely within that 'realm of aesthetics' that is his unique sublation of substance into style.

Through his camp antics with the dead and doubled female star, Lynch satisfies the truism that 'sadism lies at the heart of all patriarchy, pornography, and dominant narrative cinema',[33] without taking it all the way – or, to be more accurate, by taking it much too far. In his exaggerated stylization of death, Lynch's 'sadism' assimilates what Gilles Deleuze has called the 'mechanical, cumulative repetition of Sade'.[34] Dern's life is not, as would seem to be the case, the target of Lynch's violence; the real violence lies in his outrageously protracted dragging out of her death. Echoing the closeup of the old-fashioned phonograph whose crackling and spinning opens the film – and which, superimposed over Dern's face, reoccurs throughout *Inland Empire* – Dern is etched in the grooves of Lynch's cinematic revolutions, eternally played under his needle. As long as she is stuck within the inexorable circles of Lynch's parasitically proliferating parallel worlds, death will never restore her to her absolute singularity.

Sontag's breakdown of the death-defying aesthetics of Sade in her essay 'The pornographic imagination' readily transposes to an understanding of this impossibility of death in Lynch. Sontag helps to clarify the aesthetic measure of Lynch's interminable compulsion to 'torture the woman':

> *People often die in Sade's books. But these deaths always seem unreal. … Indeed, one might speculate that the fatiguing repetitiveness of Sade's books is the consequence of his imaginative failure to confront the inevitable goal or haven of a truly systematic venture of the pornographic imagination. Death is the only end to the odyssey of the pornographic imagination when it becomes systematic; that is, when it becomes focused on the pleasures of transgression rather than mere pleasure itself. Since he could not or would not arrive at his ending, Sade stalled. He multiplied*

> *and thickened his narrative, tediously reduplicating orgiastic permutations and combinations.*[35]

Since death, apparently, is also not an option for Lynch, in *Inland Empire* he perpetuates a ‘reiterated quantitative process of … adding victim upon victim, again and again retracing the thousand circles of an irreducibly solitary argument’.[36] In the case of Sade, death is the condition of reality that must be disavowed in order to phantasmatically extend the pleasures of the sexual relation. For Lynch, however, whose pornographic tendencies are, by Sontag's criteria, more transgressive than Sade's, the mastery of death constitutes its own infinitely absorbing pleasure. Instead of ‘adding victim upon victim’, Lynch simply divides one woman into many. Dern not only returns as herself, but always as *more* than herself as she consistently continues to not die. As the representational violence against Dern escalates, the Sadean double that *cannot* die begins to overshadow the uncanny double that persists *undead*.

The false denouement of Dern's not dying on Hollywood Boulevard ushers in this ascendance of the Sadean double over the uncanny double in *Inland Empire*. After the cameras have stopped rolling, Dern strays off the movie soundstage into a vacant auditorium. Projected on the big screen is her conversation with the private detective. She fearfully watches herself recite the prescient lines we have heard before, resounding throughout the empty theatre: ‘I was watching everything going around … like in a dark theatre before they bring the lights up … wondering how can this be’. This reiteration of the same lines from the film-within-the-film, which previously reflected our situation as spectators, now resituates Dern in a horrifying tautology. The Sadean double as a creature of quantity, or as an indestructible leftover of excessive violence, is made painfully conspicuous here. Dern witnesses the resurrection of her dead screen double blown up to gigantically disorientating proportions (figure 1).

Fig. 1.



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Dern witnesses her gigantic double on screen. *Inland Empire* (David Lynch, 2006).

The dwarfing aspect of this posthumous encounter is also significant in a more digitally determined respect. As a visual metaphor it marks a confrontation between the 'dying' body of film and the digital substitute that alters the terms of cinematic scale. The macabre theatrics of a film such as *Sunset Boulevard* is predicated upon the decline of a female star unable to adapt to 'changes in cultural technologies', usually entailing a degrading diminution in the quality and size of her image. As it does throughout the film, though, the intervention of the digital here overpowers Dern's self-bearings. Lynch reflexively points to the digital's exorbitant ability to camp up the cinematic medium – to amplify it even bigger than its bigger-than-life mystique – in Dern's recursive and hyperbolized image, which elicits terror rather than pathos. While there are no special effects in *Inland Empire* that cannot be achieved through a careful splicing, superimposing and montaging of celluloid, it is the instantaneous virtuosity of the digital with its exponential ubiquity, duration and scale that enables Lynch's profligate doubling and dividing, magnifying and shrinking of his female star in his unwieldy experiment of cinematic time and space split and dispersed.

The closing scenes of *Inland Empire*, like that of Dern's 'death', retract into yet another acrobatic reframing of her image. The intersections of past and present, actual and virtual, conjured throughout the film converge in an entropic deja vu of digital simultaneity. Dern reenters the film-within-a-film that infects her reality even after it has ostensibly ended. Returning to her red lamp-lit bedroom, Dern finds a gun. She wanders into the corridors of what appears to be a deserted hotel, ending up at room number *47*, the title of the cursed Polish film that plagues *On High in Blue Tomorrows*. A character credited only as the 'Phantom' guards the door. Dern shoots him several times as he inches towards her in sinister fashion. As she fires her last bullet, Dern's face flashes beneath the Phantom's. In

an archetypal expression of Lynch's camp sadism, her face is monstrously stretched out like a murderous clown's, blood gushing from the mouth. The door to room *47* clicks open as Dern's desecrated visage dissolves in front of her. Dern backs through the door into the empty set of what we have come to recognize as the stage for *Inland Empire*'s ‘rabbit sitcom’, in which the elliptical pronouncements of the three human-sized rabbits (voiced by Naomi Watts, Laura Harring and Scott Coffey) meet with canned laughter and applause. Wandering into the ruins of their televisual universe, Dern appears, in her exorcism of the Phantom, to have unlocked the previously blocked connection between the different mediated realms of the story. We watch as she crosses into the same time and space as her murdered historical double.

This other double, the ‘lost’ Polish actress of *4/7*, has been the rapt spectator of the ‘wicked dream’ that likewise parasitizes her reality. She has followed the entirety of *Inland Empire* broadcast on her television in real time. As Dern's gaze drifts into the blinding light of the spotlight on the rabbit stage, Lynch cuts to the hotel room in which the lost girl has been trapped. As we watch the girl watching the television, Dern's shadowy form is outlined in its screen as she enters the room. The girl tentatively rises to greet her (figure 2). The image on our screen is reflected in the television, which reflects the same image from the television screen, and so on ad infinitum in an optical feedback loop of uncanny synchronization. Reunited in this redemptive contemporaneity, the pair wordlessly kiss as Dern fades out of the picture (figure 3). Dern is transported back to her couch in her Beverly Hills mansion and, in the last image of the film, she looks over at a double of herself sitting across the room, radiant and calm (figure 4).

Fig. 2.



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Digital simultaneity: the film broadcast on television. *Inland Empire* (David Lynch, 2006).

Fig. 3.



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Dern fades away as she kisses her Polish double. *Inland Empire* (David Lynch, 2006).

Fig. 4.



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The final image: the digitally remastered woman in trouble. *Inland Empire* (David Lynch, 2006).

In this absolving vision of grace, Lynch slyly adheres to the principle of ambiguous doubling he sustains throughout *Inland Empire*. By returning Dern to the comfort of her home, he depicts the original definition of the German *unheimlich* as a violence that springs from within the tame comfort of the domestic, just as, in the climactic shooting scene, Dern discovers herself ‘inside’ the Phantom that she must kill. Alternatively, this

homecoming lends itself to a Sadean reading: despite Dern's tribulations under Lynch's tutelage, she remains pristinely untouched, poised for the whole apparatus of torture to begin again. Through this circular non-ending, Lynch substantiates Sontag's claim that 'camp taste transcends the nausea of the replica'.[37] Dern returns anew as Lynch's digitally remastered woman in trouble, wound tight into the reels of her timeless execution.

In interviews about the making of *Inland Empire*, Lynch effusively praises the newfound wonders of the digital medium. Citing its 'forty-minute takes', 'automatic focus', 'amazing flexibility and control' and 'ten thousand new tools',[38] he enthuses that 'the sky's the limit with the digital'. 'Film is beautiful', he concedes, 'but I would die if I had to go that slow ever again. It's not slow in a good way. It's death, death, death.'[39]

And yet, as I have tried to show in this essay, despite his protestations Lynch's digitally produced *Inland Empire* may nevertheless be his most death-obsessed work. Lynch's endorsement of the speed and flexibility of the digital medium infinitely protracts his sadistic deferral of the finite nature of death. In Lynch's hands the 'death of cinema', like the 'death' of Laura Dern, is subject to an endless delay that is an aesthetic correlate to our newly possessive attitude towards the afterlife of the cinematic image. As Laura Mulvey has argued in *Death 24x a Second*, with the advent of more 'user-friendly' electronic and digital technologies, spectators can replay and return with ease to privileged cinematic moments and scenes. Mulvey pertinently connects this phenomenon to the spectator's 'heightened relation to the human body, particularly that of the star'.[40] The contemplation and possession of the star – once relegated to the extracinematic paraphernalia of film stills and fan photos – can now unfold on screen, explicitly controlled by the viewer's desire to revisit chosen looks, actions and gestures again and again. In a reversal of Mulvey's classic paradigm of spectatorship, the sadistic instinct now lies not in the (male) protagonist's or spectator's driving forward of the plotline, but in the recursive retarding of narrative progression. Committing an 'act of violence against the cohesion of the story', this 'possessive' spectator, impelled by the pleasure of a digitally enabled repetition compulsion, watches as 'the apparatus overtakes the [human] figure's movement'. The fetishized star, more than ever before, 'becomes an extension of the machine, conjuring up the pre-cinematic ghosts of automata'.[41]

In *Inland Empire* Lynch transmutes the violence of his 'possessive' spectatorship onto the body of Dern, who regresses from a star making her Hollywood comeback to one perpetually coming back, mechanized in an arrested development like one of those ghostly automata that are cinema's uncanny precursors. For Mulvey the digital's triggering of this particular return of the repressed constitutes both a pensive 'acceptance of, and an escape from' the knowledge of film's 'physical decline and technological displacement'.[42]

Far from a stance of mourning, for Lynch the seduction of the digital is exactly its power to displace the fragile materiality of the cinema into something that can truly serve as an ‘indestructible support’ for the aesthetic virtuosities of his infinite ‘play of pain’ through the abstracted figure of woman.

Lynch's sadism is arguably part of a larger syndrome of ‘possessive’ cinephilia that moves the director not just to rewatch, but to reenact and reconstruct the ghosts of a treasured cinema – as he does with his nesting of *Sunset Boulevard* in *Inland Empire* – in his remixed remakes. As D. N. Rodowick observes in his aptly titled *The Virtual Life of Film*, one virtue of the digital is its practically limitless speed and fidelity of ‘copying and transmission’. Operating within a ‘accelerated relationship to time’, it permits information from the ‘cumulative past’, filmic or otherwise, to be felt immediately ‘connected or embedded’ in the present.[43] Utilizing the immense quantitative gains of the digital, Lynch imports and embeds the legacy of the cinema within it. Taking conceptual advantage of the digital's boundless capacity for duplication and manipulation – ‘without generational loss or degradation of quality’[44] – Lynch drags out the cinema's mythic death, resurrecting its cumulative array of motifs, conventions and signifying codes in an ever-expanding digital double.

This doubling and looping of the cinematic within the digital does not necessarily imply the redemption of film, much as Lynch's sadistic renewal of his dead female star does not imply the redemption of woman. In accordance with the unusual ethical bind of Lynch's allegiance to returning the repressed, the repression of death in *Inland Empire* itself comes back in the closing credit sequence in the guise of a musical parable. The seven-minute coda features a troupe of jubilant black dancers lip-synching to Nina Simone's famous 1965 cover of ‘Sinnerman’, a traditional American gospel song about running back and forth between the Lord and the Devil, Heaven and Hell. Amid the frantic refrain of the lyrics, ‘Oh Sinnerman, where you gonna run to?’, Lynch's camera surveys the electrified scene. Silently beaming from the couch, Dern presides over this celebratory purgatory of lost souls: gathered together are the ‘imaginary’ characters and ‘unconscious’ images, prominent among them the Greek chorus of prostitutes, that may or may not have actually appeared in the film. These fragments of *Inland Empire*'s undead return here transformed into lively automatons, endlessly looping to a song that thematizes an eternal moral limbo.[45]

This image of a loop is a fitting emblem for Lynch's uncanny sadism. In *Inland Empire* Lynch orchestrates a digital meta-language that abstracts the cinema into a toy for his *fort/da* game between death and undeath in a chain of mise-en-scenes erected to showcase the mise-en-abyme of Dern. Taking a cue from Lynch's pornography of the uncanny, I conclude with a return to the death scene on Hollywood Boulevard. Dern's trick

death is not, as I initially suggested, the backdrop for the joke Lynch plays on either her or us, but an excuse for the telling of one of his most dazzlingly ‘loopy’ yarns in another twist to his camp horror chronicles. This one features an Asian prostitute named Niko who lives in Pomona, a city in Southern California's Inland Empire. Niko wears a blonde wig that makes her look ‘just like a movie star’. She keeps a pet monkey that can ‘scream and scream like in a horror movie’. Unfortunately, Niko's ‘time has run out’, because she has ‘got a hole in her vagina wall’. A fleshy metonym for the various ‘holes’ in *Inland Empire*, Niko's ‘hole’ is the *Heim*-like womb that is a standard trope for the uncanny; it is the rabbit hole of time through which Dern slips; and it is the very real hole wreaked upon the female body by a sadistic sexual violence.

‘You don't have to die to do a death scene’, Lynch has said.[46] This recalls Sontag's sentiment that, in terms of camp, it is not death but ‘death’, and that, at its heart, ‘camp is a tender feeling’.[47] Taking death, not life, as his most extravagant theatre, no matter how many holes Lynch's excruciating tenderness may put into her or loop her through, the female star will forever be his mutely ‘beautiful victim’ – a punched-out cliche from the factory of dreams, memorialized only to be walked over:

> *The wheel revolves in its daily crucifixion. The cinema hinders [her] from dying. O cruel fate. O infernal torture not to be able to flee oneself. O the pain of immortality.*[48]

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